



A THEMATIC STUDY OF SELECT FAMILY PLAYS BY SAM SHEPARD

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the two select plays *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West* from Sam Shepard's family quintet. These two plays have earned Shepard a strong fame in his writing career. The paper also clarifies the themes of American culture, such as people's goals and the negative impacts on those from lower and middle class origins who are attempting to improve their lot in life in the nation's modern civilization. Sam Shepard writes social and political dramas in his plays *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West*. They illustrate how politics and literature are related, as well as how important it is for writing to keep up with changes in society. The families struggle to save their lives, which are a representation of their social status, but they have no hope or strategy at all. The author believes that the families represent the essence of America and its culture. The themes of these plays reflect the day today life of the families from Western society. They carry some important features like violence, dysfunction in family system, heredity, the desert, dreaming, poverty, and the most important is 'curse'. These two dramas by Shepard are beautifully representing the dysfunctional family system in the Western society.

In his first play *Curse of the Starving Class* Shepard introduces the Tate family. It's about the family of disturbed people. They are like the get people scrambled in their relationships and their desires. They are also the example of the dysfunctional families. Shepard believes that the family embodies the essence of America. Sam Shepard has written a series of five plays based on family trilogies. This quintet consists *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) *Buried Child* (1979) *True West* (1980) *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1995) these plays are not only the family plays but the representatives of the American society. The play *Curse of the Starving Class* opens with no frontier as the front door which is just broken by Weston, the male head of the family in scene first of the play. He is the head of the family and Ella's husband. They have two children Wesley and Emma.

In *Curse of the Starving Class* the whole family lives under the same roof but their thoughts, emotions and even relations are totally scattered. Each character in the play has a different way of thinking. There is no consideration of emotions, realisation, feelings, ideas and thoughts. Generally in every family the decisions are made by the head of the family which is father, mother or both father and mother. But in Tate family Weston and Ella are the opposite sides of the same river. They treat themselves as the head of their family. Weston is an irresponsible and a drunker father who can't even handle his own consciousness and is far away from his responsibilities. A father works hard to construct a safe frontier to his house but he is a type of father who breaks it.

Self-centred Parenthood

Ella is a representative of a modern and western mother with self centred attitude. She wants to sell the house in order to get settled in Europe. She has a plan to sell the house to Taylor, a broker and lawyer by profession. By this money she wants to get settled in Europe. She asked Emma, her only teenage daughter if she wants to come with her mother. As she asks to Emma about going to Europe the same she asks her son Wesley whether he is interested to join her. But no one of them shows any interest in her plan.

Ella decides not to take her husband to Europe with her. She indirectly behaves as if she is fed up of her family, her husband and wants to run away from them. She even does not want to tell Weston about her plan of Europe. Shepard has shown how every individual in American families, like the Tate family, lives her/ his life independently and free from all other bondage.

True West is also a best example of a dysfunctional family. This play is about a scattered family. The play too has a drunker

father whose name is not mentioned, just like Old Man in *Fool for Love*. He lives in the desert and one of two sons, Lee and Austin. Austin is a script writer settled with his family. Lee, on the other hand is opposite to Austin who follows the lifestyle of his father and lives in the desert. Their mother loves separate in her house alone. At the opening scene it is revealed that Austin is taking care of his mother's house and plants. He is busy in doing some work on the typewriter. At the same time his brother Lee, enters the scene and the worst things start happening. Like the play *Curse of the Starving Class* in *True West* also no character understands each other. They are not united. Tate family lives under the safe roof but the family in 'True West' does not live under same roof. They are all separate. Their relation is only a relation for name and for nothing else.

An invisible Curse

The families in both plays *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West* suffer with 'Curse'. The concept of curse is visibly seen in these plays because these families never get through any progress nor they keep any wish for it. They sometimes think

to get out of the situation but they don't get success in it. They have the ability to imagine the result of their future lives but still they do nothing for any change. The Tate family belongs to The Starving class. They are starving and their refrigerator witnesses their hungry. They have nothing to eat but still they open the fridge again and again then Slam it.

It is the focal point of the play's theme of hunger and malnutrition and a sign that highlights what it means for family members to be deprived. Despite their shared belief that they are not members of the 'starving class,' the characters are all hungry. 'Starving' in the play refers to the characters' 'hunger' for fulfilment as a result of their internal psychological turmoil. They lack love, trust, tight family ties, and affection in addition to physical and financial hunger. The refrigerator tells the tale of the Americans' life as they searched for food that was gone and starved to death. Thomas P. Adler states in his essay Repetition and Regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*: Thomas p. Adler says ; "There are multiple layers to the starving, including spiritual, mental, and physical aspects. It expresses an almost spiritual sense of agony and desperation..." (Adler 112).

In the second play *True West* the family is scattered. The Mother goes on vacations and gives the responsibility of her house and plants to her son Austin. As Lee enters the play slowly it makes Austin mentally disturbed though he meets his elder brother Lee after 5 years. Shepard dramatises the two different roles from the western culture, Austin and Lee. They both are they represent the different regions and interest of life from same nation and same culture. In this play Austin is the representative of a man who is settled and happy with his family and desires no more. On the other hand Lee is the representative of a wild and isolated life in the desert, just like their father.

Hence two families struggle for their survival. Though they are a family they don't think of the betterment of the others. They have the Curse of their fruitless struggle, lazy lifestyle, life with no respect, self centred attitude, fights, loss of peace of mind and disturbed lifestyle. The Curse is not uttered in these plays but it is there. It never let them leave happily or peacefully. They always try to get separate. They have no family attachment among all of them.

This suffers a lot due to their poverty and desires. In order to fulfil their desires they forget their relationship too. In the Tate family Ella and Weston live like strangers. They are husband and wife still they have no love and care for each other. Ella is always disappointed and unhappy from her husband so she finds her comfort in friendship with other man like Taylor with an extra marital affair.

Emma and Wesley are siblings but they don't understand things as they should. They have lack of maturity and responsibility. Ella is a teenager and feels herself a free girl. She decides to find her own way of life. First she is seen a school girl who is busy in her project but due to irresponsible behaviour of her family members she turns to a bad girl from school going teenager. She is the only active but rebellious character in the Play. Her

aggressiveness becomes the reason of her death at last.

In *True West* the family of separate mother and father and two brothers is also cursed with such things by discomfort, discontent life, separation and jealousy. The brothers, Lee and Austin meet each other after five years; still they have no worm welcome for each other. Due to jealousy they don't like each other. Specially try to divert his sincere brother Austin and convinces him to dream about wildlife in the desert which he himself has been living. Their parents leave separate from years. Their father the Old Man, who never appears on stage, leaves in the desert and there, mother appears in the last scene, live in her house where Austin temporarily stays for taking its care in her absence. At last scene Mom is seen as she just returns from her vacations in Alaska.

The sorrowful thing in this play is when the mother has no care and attachment for her children. In last scene when Lee refuses to take Austin to the desert, Austin in anger tries to kill Lee by tangling him with a telephonic chord because he does not want Lee to go to the desert alone. Austin wants Lee to take him to the desert with him. In such situation there Mom looks them fighting and instead of resolving the problem she leaves for a motel with her bags. She says that this house is a worst place to live and she can't identify it as her own. She lives from there without stopping them fighting. This above mentioned action is evidence that they have no healthy relationship any way. Such kind of behaviour of a mother is unexpected and unaccepted in any culture but it's the reality of western culture which is depicted by Shepard. Such strange treatment of parents with their children is something we don't expect in blood relations. It seems as if these people are possessed with some strong Curse of destruction which is invisible and unuttered by anyone.

Every character in this play has a dream. The dreams may not be appropriate by a social and moral point of view but they want these dreams to be fulfilled. Every member of Tate family, except Wesley, has a dream for his/her upcoming life. Ella wants to settle in Europe without her husband. It doesn't matter whether children accompany her or not. Her daughter Emma Wants to follow her criminal mind and expects herself to become a successful business woman and earn money by a wrong way.

Weston, at the last part, wants to continue with his property and thinks about the progress of their avocado farm. Wesley is the only character having no dream, ambition or plan for his future. What he wants is not to sell in the house but he has no active involvement or any kind of efforts in making things better. He is the most silent and passive character in the play.

Shepard's play *True West* is a representation of a weak family. Its members are not able to take proper decisions and actions. They can't make a better decision related to their career or future and even their relations. They easily get diverted for wrong concepts. Their minds easily turn wild. They have no dream and ambition for their future. These characters are self centred but they are not successful in turning their dreams into reality. They are always unsatisfied with their lives and even

with the society. They have no dreams for themselves but at some occasions they pretend to have them.

Conclusion

The plays paint a darkly hilarious psychological portrayal of the American family, one that emphasizes the breakdown of morals and the family spirit due to the influence of a materialistic society, as well as the violent clashes between its estranged and damaged members who are unable to coexist. *Curse of the Starving Class* is an odd comedy that combines a critique of 1950s American rural living with a deep, semi-autobiographical explanation.

REFERENCE

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